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The Lufton Villa Excavations 2016: a preliminary report

James Gerrard and Andrew Agate

The Lufton Roman villa was excavated by L. C. Hayward between 1946 and 1952 and again between 1960 and 1963. The reports produced on these interventions were published in *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society* volumes 97 and 116 and form the basis of all subsequent discussions of the site. Seen as a fourth-century corridor villa with an ostentatious octagonal bath house the site, along with four comparable buildings, has been the focus of much discussion.

The Lufton Project began in 2009 with the Society's assistance and has evolved into a large scale landscape project. Almost 40ha of land has been covered by geophysical survey (largely undertaken by SSARG) and five seasons of excavation on various sites have been undertaken. The fifth season took place in August 2016 and re-examined the villa, which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. This short article is a brief preliminary report on these investigations. However, the reader should be aware that the interpretations advanced here are provisional and written soon after the authors finished the excavation.

The project design submitted to Historic England for Scheduled Monuments Consent envisaged two trenches being dug. Trench A would be 17m x 17m and look at the southern end of the building. Trench B would be much smaller and positioned to assess the state of preservation of the bathhouse. In the event Trench A proved complex enough to require all of this year's resources and Trench B was not excavated – a position endorsed by Historic England.

Trench A revealed a complex and in places deeply stratified sequence. Re-investigation of Rooms 3 and 4 proved that Hayward's team had completely excavated these structures to beneath floor level, removing in the process all internal deposits including fragmentary mosaics. The corridor (Room 1) and the so-called 'wing' (Room 2) were also partially examined. Of considerable interest were a series of interleaving burnt deposits in this area (Fig 1). At the top of this sequence were the fragmentary remains of an oven or grain drier. Hayward had identified these features as 'hearths' but had not investigated them further. A single sherd of a burnt BB1 Type 18 bowl from this grain drier suggests that it was in use at the very end of the fourth or in the early fifth century.

All of these burnt deposits were later than a substantial wall of herringbone masonry that blocked the corridor (Room 1) in line with the south wall of Room 2 (Fig 1). A similar wall blocked the corridor in line with Room 2's north wall. This and a spread of roof tiles that sealed the robbed western wall of the building north of Room 4 suggests that late in the structure's life the building was shortened and underwent considerable structural modification.

North of Room 2 a small room was discovered in an area of the site Hayward considered to be external space. This room was found to contain a slumping tessellated floor of grey lias tesserae (Fig 2). Excavation of the thin black deposit overlying this floor recovered a couple of pottery sherds, a fourth-century bead and reel bone hairpin of Crummy's (1985) Type 5 and a small clutch of oyster shells on the floor's surface. It is hoped that soil samples taken from this context will provide further insights into the function and disuse of this space.

Further discoveries were made in the northern part of the site. Much of Hayward's Rooms 5 and 6 appear to have been disturbed and robbed in antiquity. This was probably to salvage and recycle tiles and other building materials. The excavation of these thick rubbly deposits was arduous work but revealed a hitherto unsuspected early phase in the form of an apsidal hypocausted room (Fig 3). The hypocaust system was fired from a flue of partially robbed massive fire-reddened hamstone blocks. The fill of this flue produced a coin of Crispus (CAESARVM NOSTRVM VOT X) provisionally dated to AD318-324. As the flue would have occupied the line of the corridor (Room 1) this hypocausted structure must predate the plan of the building as recorded by Hayward. This assertion is confirmed by the depth of stratigraphy sealing the southern end of the structure.

The recovery of 51 coins brings the total number of excavated coins to 66. Following conservation the identifiable coins are presented as a Reece diagram in Fig 4. These show a strong coin loss from the late third century onwards, although no coins later than the House of Valentinian (AD364-378) have been found/

Other finds include a large plano-convex lead ingot (weighing 37Kg) and a complete Type 3 BB1 jar, decorated with just diagonal burnished lines (Fig 5). This type of vessel is paralleled by finds in very late fourth or early fifth century deposits at other sites. Fragments of painted plaster, animal bones, tiles, pottery and window glass were also recovered.

The current excavations of the Lufton villa have transformed our understanding of this nationally important site. New structural evidence has been forthcoming and the history of the building is far more complex than Hayward believed. Another season of excavation would be worthwhile but requires considerable financial support (somewhere in the region of £35,000).

Acknowledgements

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Fig 1 Burnt deposits in Rooms 1 and 2, with wall blocking the line of Room 1 in the foreground. Andrew Agate

Fig 2 Tessellated pavement. This room was found in a part of the site Hayward considered to be outside of the main building. Andrew Agate

Fig 3 The hypocausted room and flue of massive hamstone blocks. Andrew Agate

Fig 4 The Roman coins (before conservation) from Lufton by Reece period. James Gerrard

Fig 5 Complete Type 3 BB1 jar decorated with just diagonal lines. Andrew Agate



Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3

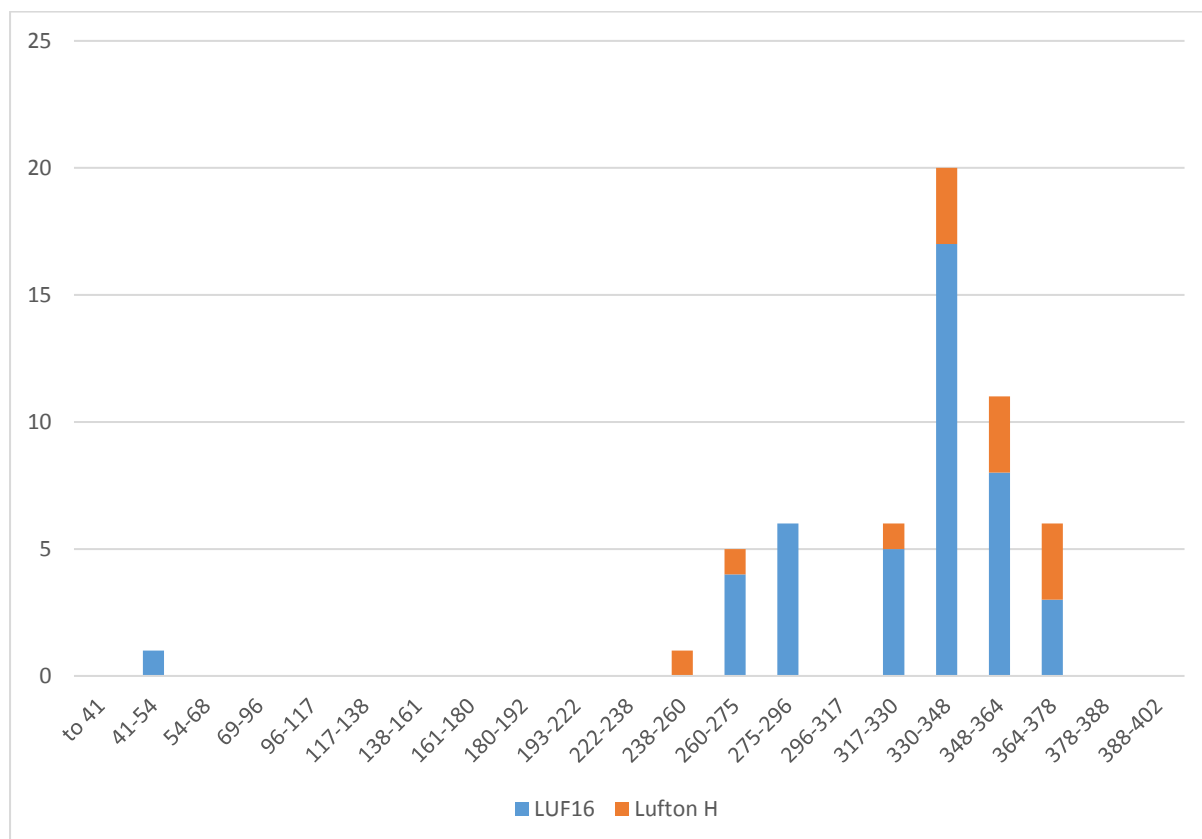


Fig 4



Fig 5